

Testimony of Danielle Burns  
In Support of Funding for Legal Services  
February 27, 2015

Good evening to all members of this Committee and to those watching here and elsewhere. My name is Danielle Burns. I am here to testify in support of funding for legal aid. The budget takes away over \$700,000 in SSBG block grant funding from legal aid. I want to tell you how important legal aid has been for me and ask you not to make that cut.

I have been fortunate and privileged enough to utilize the service of the New Haven Legal Assistance in a number of circumstances that have arisen since the birth of my son in 2011. I have also been informed several times over the past few years when legal aid has hearings such as this one and am happy to speak as a client on behalf of their irreplaceable and essential services for individuals with income, language and educational barriers. I have no doubt in my mind that the services they provide are essential, as you will see when you could consider my experience with this organization.

I am a single mother turning 30 this year. Over the past 4 years I have struggled with legal issues arising from my child's father who ran me through every system he could, to more or less make my life miserable. This past year he managed to get DCF to remove my son with no judge or court order as well open a case against me in both the civil and criminal courts. He put our son into a daycare a family member owned and had other family members in law enforcement and local schools, all trying to keep me out of the decision making about the best interest of our son. I have been in recovery for the past 5 years, so I looked the part of the bad guy to many of the case workers after they read my files. If New Haven Legal Assistance had not taken my case and assisted in my initial meeting with DCF, who took nearly 2 months to meet with me, I might have lost my son. They never took me to court but they yelled, lied, mixed up my files, and were in general the worst monster I have ever encountered during the time my case was open. I would have been bullied and abused by these systems alone if legal aid hadn't been working with me. In most cases legal aid is not allowed to help with DCF until the case is already in court, but because they were already representing me in family court, I had access to their DCF expert's legal help as well. The only proof of my wrongdoing was what my ex told them. I had the "Birth to Three" program try to enroll my son in special education based on testing they had done prior to my consent and without my attendance. With the help of legal aid and an advocate from the parent leadership training, my son now attends a regular preschool where he is thriving.

With legal aid's help in my custody and my DCF case, my son has been residing with me full time again since June of last year. I have physical custody of my son and, with legal aid's help in negotiating an agreement in family court, I began attending co-parenting counseling with my son's father to salvage our communication for my sons sake. All of these things are possible because of legal aid.

I am in the process of starting my own business now. There is no way my life would be where it is today without the individuals from this organization as well as the countless other resources they provide to the community. The bulletin boards inside their office always have postings for support groups and fundraisers. I have shopped at the Helping Hands store, advertised on legal aid's bulletin board, which is similar to a Goodwill and they even have vouchers for clients who can't afford to furnish new homes. I have a hard time believing that taking money away from this organization would benefit anyone who truly believes in improving our society.

Legal aid is the star in an endless dark sky of obstacles, that protects and can guide the most vulnerable and exploited populations to a better life.